



# Beginning Teenage Drivers



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## Beginning drivers' crashes differ

Teen drivers have the highest crash risk of any age group. Per mile traveled, they have the highest involvement rates in all types of crashes, from those involving only property damage to those that are fatal. The problem is worst among 16 year-olds, who have the most limited driving experience and an immaturity that often results in risk-taking behind the wheel. The characteristics of 16 year-olds' fatal crashes highlight these problems.

Percentage of Fatal Crashes by Characteristic, 1998

	Driver Age: 16	17-19	20-49
Driver error	80	75	62
Speeding	36	31	22
Single vehicle	41	37	30
3+ occupants	33	26	19
Drivers killed with 0.01+ BAC	8	25	47

**Driver error:** Compared with crashes of older drivers, those of 16 year-olds more often involve driver error.

**Speeding:** Sixteen-year-old drivers have a higher rate of crashes in which excessive speed is a factor.

**Single-vehicle crashes:** More of 16 year-olds' fatal crashes involve only the teen's vehicle. Typically these are high-speed crashes in which the driver lost control.

**Passengers:** Sixteen year-olds' fatal crashes are more likely to occur when other teenagers are in the car. The risk increases with every additional passenger.

**Alcohol:** Although this is a problem among drivers of all ages, it's actually less of a problem for 16 year-olds. Thirteen percent of fatally injured drivers in 1998 had positive blood alcohol concentrations (BACs). Only 8 percent had BACs of 0.10 percent or greater.

**Night driving:** This is a high-risk activity for beginners. Per mile driven, the nighttime fatal crash rate for 16 year-olds is about twice as high as during the day.

**Low belt use:** Teenagers generally are less likely than adults to use safety belts.



## One last curve in the road

"Her name is Emily. She was 16 years old, and lots of wonderful things were going to happen in her life," laments Charrise Hubbard, Emily's mother. Emily died in a single-vehicle crash less than a year after getting her license.

It was still daylight as Emily was driving herself to a birthday party at the pool where she was a lifeguard. Just as she was rounding a curve in the road, she drifted over the shoulder, overcorrected, struck a culvert, and was ejected through the passenger window of her truck.

"I would have sworn Emily was too smart not to have her safety belt on at all times. She was so bright and practical," Charrise says. After all, Emily was president of her class. She belonged to the National Honor Society. She even was on her school's newspaper staff and power-lifting team. "Sometimes, we just assume our kids are doing the things we've worked so hard to teach them."

Charrise adds that "the thought of Emily's last few seconds on this earth often haunts me. Was she afraid? Did she feel pain? Did she think of all of us who love her so much? The convenience of having Emily drive and the fun she had driving her own car were short-lived. If we had known the statistics, we would have made her go through a step-by-step process to earn her driving privileges. Anything would be worth having Emily back with us."



### Graduated licensing can help

Teenagers perceive a driver's license as a ticket to freedom. It's momentous for parents, too. Though they often are aware of 16 year-olds' high crash risks, they're relieved not to have to chauffeur their children around anymore. But the price is steep. Crashes are **the leading cause of death** among American teens, accounting for more than one third of all deaths of 16 to 18 year-olds.

An effective way to reduce this toll is graduated licensing. Driving privileges are phased in to restrict beginners' initial experience to lower risk situations. The restrictions gradually are lifted, so teenagers are more experienced and mature when they get their full, unrestricted licenses.

Graduated systems that are well designed restrict night driving, limit teen passengers, establish zero tolerance for alcohol, and require a specified amount of supervised practice during the initial phase. Graduated licensing laws have reduced teenagers' crash rates in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand, but not all states have such laws. With or without a state law, **parents can establish rules** based on the graduated model.

### What parents of teenagers can do

When parents understand the risk factors involved in letting 16 year-olds get behind the wheel, they can act to improve the situation for their own children.Z

**Don't rely solely on driver education:** High school driver education may be the most convenient way to learn driving skills, but it doesn't produce safer drivers. Poor skills aren't always to blame for teens' crashes. Their attitudes and decision-making skills matter more. Young people naturally tend to rebel, and peer pressure influences them more than advice from adults. They often think they're immune to harm, which is why they don't use safety belts as much and why they deliberately seek thrills like speeding. Training and education don't change these tendencies.

**Restrict night driving:** Most nighttime fatal crashes among young drivers occur between 9 p.m. and midnight, so teenagers shouldn't be driving much later than 9 p.m. The problem isn't just that late-night driving requires more skill. Outings late at night tend to be recreational. In these circumstances, even teens who usually follow all the rules can be easily distracted or encouraged to take risks.

**Restrict passengers:** Teen passengers in a vehicle can distract a beginning driver and/or lead to greater risk-taking. Because young drivers often transport their friends, there's a teen passenger problem as well as a teen driver problem. Almost two of every three teen passenger deaths (62 percent) occur in crashes with a teen driver. While night driving with passengers is particularly lethal, many fatal crashes with teen passengers occur during the day. The best policy is to restrict teen passengers, especially multiple teens, all the time.

**Supervise practice driving:** Take an active role in helping your teenager learn how to drive. Plan a series of practice sessions in a wide variety of situations, including night driving. Give beginners time to work up to challenges like driving in heavy traffic or on the freeway. Supervised practice should be spread over at least six months and continue even after a teenager graduates from a learner's permit to a restricted or full license.

**Remember you are a role model:** New drivers learn a lot by example, so practice safe driving. Teens with crashes and violations often have parents with poor driving records.

**Require safety belt use:** Don't assume that belt use when you're in the car with your 16 year-old means belts will be used all the time, especially when your child is out with peers. Remember that belt use is lower among teenagers than older people. Insist on belts all the time.

**Prohibit driving after drinking:** Make it clear that it's illegal and highly dangerous for a teenager to drive after drinking alcohol or using any other drug. While alcohol isn't a factor in most crashes of 16-year-old drivers, even small amounts of alcohol are impairing for teens.

**Choose vehicles for safety, not image:** Teenagers should drive vehicles that reduce their chances of a crash and offer protection in case they do crash. For example, small cars don't offer the best protection in a crash. Avoid cars with performance images that might encourage speeding. Avoid trucks and sport utility vehicles — the smaller ones, especially, are more prone to roll over.

## Going home for the playoffs

When their 16-year-old son Gabriel missed his Friday night curfew, Charles and Maureen Puccia started to fear the worst. They wouldn't know for hours that Gabe had died with two teenage friends in a crash earlier that night.

Gabe's night started out without much of a plan. He and some friends were supposed to meet at a pancake house, but only a few people showed up. That's when Gabe and others headed home to watch the playoffs. None had been drinking, and they had only two miles to drive. But 17-year-old Matt was going about twice the speed limit when the car veered off the road and hit a tree.

Gabe's parents had to make several calls just to get the news. "He had one of those little earrings in his ear, and a special jacket he had bought in Italy," Charles recalls. "And the guy at the hospital said, 'I think we have your son.'"

"Our grief is for Gabe's loss, not our own — to not know what we could have done for him and to not watch him find whatever it was he wanted in life." Now the Puccias focus on their younger son, Emilio. "This is a case where we're willing to go all the way, enforcing the graduated licensing law to the utmost and beyond."

